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General Assembly
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82nd plenary meeting
Friday, 20 March 2015, 10 a.m.
New York

President: Mr. Kutesa ..... (Uganda)

In the absence of the President, Mr. Mahmadaminov (Tajikistan), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Agenda item 7 (*continued*)

Organization of work, adoption of the agenda and allocation of items

The Acting President: I invite the attention of the General Assembly to resolution 69/162, of 18 December 2014, which calls for a special meeting in commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Members will recall that at its 73rd plenary meeting, on 18 December 2014, the General Assembly concluded its consideration of agenda item 66. It will be necessary to reopen the consideration of that item in order to hold this special meeting. May I take it that it is the wish of the General Assembly to reopen its consideration of agenda item 66?

It was so decided.

Agenda item 66 (*continued*)

Elimination of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance

Commemorative meeting on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

The Acting President: I am pleased to join members today to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and to deliver this statement on behalf of the President of the General Assembly.

"The theme of this year's commemoration, 'Learning from historical tragedies to combat racial discrimination today', not only draws our attention to the tragedies of the past, but also calls upon each of us to act decisively to combat all forms of racism and racial discrimination.

"As members may recall, this international day of action against racism was established in remembrance of the 69 unarmed and peaceful South African protestors killed in Sharpeville, South Africa, on 21 March 1960. That tragedy was just one of the many racially influenced events in South Africa at the time. That horror resonated in many parts of the world and pushed people, nations and organizations to act to end the racist apartheid regime. In its resolution 2142 (XXI), the General Assembly proclaimed 21 March as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Through this annual commemoration, the international community joins together and vows to preserve the historical memory of past tragedies, as well as draw lessons from them to protect humankind and prevent their reoccurrence.

"This year also marks the launch of the International Decade for People of African Descent. Through today's event and many others that will take place in the context of the International Decade, we will acknowledge the profound and lasting impacts of historical human rights tragedies, including,

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slavery, the slave trade and the transatlantic slave trade. We should draw important lessons from those past tragedies so that we may use that knowledge to address contemporary manifestations of racism and racial discrimination.

"In my opening statement at the twenty-eighth regular session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, I deplored recent violent attacks on innocent people around the world motivated by discrimination based on race, ethnicity or religion. Today I reiterate that message in saying that such prejudice must not be allowed to take root in our societies. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. We must therefore continue to reject and prevent discrimination in all forms, including, xenophobia, stereotyping, hatred, marginalization and other related intolerance. We must prevent the manifestation of such acts, which have the potential to compromise peace, stability and development around the world.

"On 21 and 22 April, I will convene in conjunction with the Secretary-General and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, a high-level thematic debate on promoting tolerance and reconciliation. The debate will provide an opportunity to share experiences and develop strategies with regard to how we can foster peaceful, inclusive societies and counter violent extremism. It is my hope that this debate will add further credence to our efforts to combat racial discrimination. Indeed, countering racial discrimination and promoting tolerance and reconciliation are mutually reinforcing. Together we must use this debate and all other available platforms to condemn unequivocally all manifestations of racism, prejudice and intolerance."

I now give the floor to the Chef de Cabinet, Ms. Susana Malcorra, to make a statement on behalf of the Secretary-General.

Ms. Malcorra: I thank the President of the General Assembly for organizing this solemn and important event. It is my honour to represent the Secretary-General, who unfortunately cannot be with us today.

Every day people of all ages endure hatred, injustice and humiliation because of their skin colour, descent, national or ethnic origin or other supposedly racial characteristics. Such discrimination has underpinned oppression, poverty, slavery, genocide and war.

The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is an opportunity to renew our commitment to building a world of justice and equality where xenophobia and bigotry do not exist. We must learn the lessons of history and acknowledge the profound damage caused by racial discrimination. That means carefully preserving the memory of historical wrongs so that we may use our knowledge to eradicate prejudice and teach tolerance, non-discrimination and respect for diversity everywhere and for all.

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the launch of the International Decade for People of African Descent. In the past 50 years, there has been progress in the fight against racism and racial discrimination. We have seen the end of colonialism, the dismantling of apartheid and the rise of the global equality movement. Yet as history and current events attest, racial discrimination still presents a clear danger to people and communities in all regions. Lasting peace can be built only on the premise that people have equal rights and dignity regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion and social or other status. To that end, I urge all nations to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, to promote historical accuracy and to put in place robust policies and laws that will end all forms of discrimination as enshrined in the Convention.

It is important that we keep the spotlight on the foregoing issues and educate the young so that we may never forget the dangers inherent in racism. In January, we commemorated the victims of the Holocaust. Next week, we will unveil the memorial built to honour the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. On 7 April, we will commemorate the Rwandan genocide. All these terrible episodes in human history had their roots in racism. That is why we must learn from past tragedies to combat racism today. That is why today's event is so important.

The Acting President: I thank the Chef de Cabinet for her statement.

In accordance with resolution 69/162, of 18 December 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights was invited to speak at this commemorative meeting. The High Commissioner is unable to be here with us today due to his participation at a similar meeting in the framework of the Human Rights Council in Geneva. His message

will be made available on the website of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

I would now like to consult members with a view to inviting Ms. Verene Shepherd, member of the Human Rights Council Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, to make a statement at this meeting in accordance with resolution 69/162.

If there is no objection, I shall take it that it is the wish of the General Assembly, without setting a precedent, to invite Ms. Shepherd to make a statement at this meeting?

It was so decided.

The Acting President: In accordance with the decision just taken, I now give the floor to Ms. Shepherd.

Ms. Shepherd: It is a real privilege for me to address the General Assembly as we approach another International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, as proclaimed by the General Assembly in 1966 six years after the tragedy in South Africa that inspired its proclamation. I thank the President of the General Assembly at its sixty-ninth session, Mr. Sam Kutesa, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and my colleague members of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent for this signal honour. I applaud all who are assembled here this morning for showing, by their presence, that they share a common concern for the creation of a world in which racism, racial discrimination, Afrophobia, xenophobia and related intolerance play no part, either in our personal lives or in our international relations.

Like me, they believe in the fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the group of international instruments adopted after the Second World War as a response to the atrocities of the war, to protect the human rights and inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of the human family. Within that context, racial discrimination is to be treated as abhorrent. I therefore acknowledge the appropriateness of the theme chosen for this year's commemoration: "Learning from historical tragedies to combat racial discrimination today". The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, whose fiftieth anniversary is marked this year, is very explicit about what constitutes racial discrimination. It is defined as

> "any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life" (*International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, article 1, para. 1*)

Many of us here are familiar with the major historical tragedies and inhumane actions that have affected global history and that were related to racial or ethnic hierarchizing and discrimination, including conquest, colonization, genocide against indigenous and minority populations, the African Maafa — the transatlantic slave trade and enslavement — wars to suppress enslaved-led protests and anti-colonial uprisings, the Jewish Holocaust, racial apartheid, the brutal suppression of civil rights and labour movements — and the list goes on. There was untold suffering as a result of those tragedies and inhumane acts, including murder, torture, public flogging, imprisonment and general humiliation. The descendants of those whose ancestors suffered — for example, from the African Maafa and the Jewish Holocaust — have tried to find ways to memorialize their ancestors and seek redress for such tragedies, including through reparations.

I stand before the General Assembly as a product of some of those historical tragedies, the most tragic of which were the forced relocation of my ancestors from Africa and parts of Asia to a life of enslavement and contract labour in the Caribbean and the post-slavery and post-indentureship regime of racial apartheid and neo-colonialism, which so scarred Caribbean societies. But I also stand before the Assembly as a living example of what the battle against such historical tragedies can produce: a scholar-activist and human rights defender with no hate in her heart who can work in local, regional and international spaces with other committed advocates to try to banish the legacies of those tragedies from our landscape.

I do harbour some degree of anxiety, however — anxiety because almost 50 years after the proclamation of this International Day, too many individuals, communities and societies continue to suffer from the injustices and stigma that racism brings. And those who suffer most from racism and racial discrimination are Africans and people of African descent. However, the programme of activities for the implementation of the International

Decade for People of African Descent, launched right here in 2014 on Human Rights Day, under the theme "Recognition, justice, development" (see A/69/PV.55), offers us diverse strategies for righting the wrongs of the past so that we can build a more peaceful world.

Yes, we continue to be confronted with evidence that we are still some way from realizing the goal of universal peace, inter-ethnic harmony and unbiased justice that so many have worked to achieve, and indeed shed their blood to attain. We see the evidence today in the hands in the air because the "black lives matter/all lives matter" campaign has transformed itself from a local American movement to a global movement; in the racial taunts directed at black players at football games where, on occasion, "macaco" — or monkey — is shouted from the stands with complete disregard for the feelings of the affected players; in institutional and structural racism; in racial profiling at international borders and within some countries; in messages and ideas based on racism, racial superiority or hatred that incite racism; and in differential access to quality education, employment and justice. We see it in biased textual and visual representations, cartoons and journalistic pieces that disrespect others' religion and ethnicity; in everyday speech and attitudes that reflect xenophobia and bigotry; in cultural practices that humiliate particular ethnic groups; in the iconic symbols placed in some spaces that remind formerly oppressed populations of the perpetrators of the tragedies of the past; and in so many other areas.

I therefore join with the international community today in the global call for concrete action for the total elimination of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, Afrophobia and other intolerance, and for the comprehensive implementation of, and follow up to, the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

The year 2015 is a timely reminder to all of us of our responsibilities to those who are the victims of racism and racial discrimination, as there is a coincidence of anniversaries that remind us of the tragedies of the past. It is the fifty-first anniversary of the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act in the United States of America. It is the fiftieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday — 7 March 1965 — when police beat voting-rights activists as they attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, United States of America, to insist on voting rights. It is the 150th anniversary of the 1865 Morant Bay massacre in Jamaica, where over 400 Jamaicans were murdered by colonial forces. It is the 200th anniversary of Simón Bolívar's "carta de Jamaica", in which he explained his mission to liberate Latin America from colonial oppression. It is the 211th anniversary of Haitian independence, which was won by enslaved and free black people in a country that made the colonial oppressor rich but impoverished an entire nation.

However, there is hope amid all those painful memories. As we reflect on 21 March 1960, when police opened fire and killed 69 men, women and children at a peaceful demonstration against the apartheid pass laws in Sharpeville, South Africa, let us celebrate the fact that, since that tragic day, the apartheid system in South Africa has been dismantled, and South Africa has made great efforts to ensure that never again will a system as evil as racial apartheid raise its ugly head in their country.

The global community has also made strides in terms of the elimination of racism and racial discrimination. Colonialism has ended in many more countries since 1960, and the superstructure of slavery and racial apartheid has been dismantled. Racist laws and practices have been abolished in many countries, and the United Nations has built an international framework for fighting racism, guided by the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other rights-based instruments.

Let us commit ourselves today to the fight against the repetition of historical tragedies. The United States of America has its Edmund Pettus Bridge, the scene of the Bloody Sunday clashes, but we can build our own metaphorical or symbolic bridges, bridges of understanding, and extend such bridges across the human family, from Alaska to Argentina, from the Norwegian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, from Scotland to Siberia, from Algiers to Cape Town, from Jordan to Japan and from Russia to New Zealand, joining hands across the world for the good of us all and in memory of the victims of historical tragedies and the revolutionary struggles against various injustices. We therefore today remember some of the victims of the Sharpeville massacre, including Wiggi Bakela, James Beshe, Ephraim Chaka, Gilbert Demo, Elliot Sekoala Kabi, Miriam Lekitla and Paulina Mafulatse.

The Americas, the region in which the greatest crime against humanity was committed and where every day we struggle to eliminate the remnants of

historical tragedies and racial discrimination, also had victims of revolutionary struggles to end slavery and racial apartheid. We must sing the praises of those men and women, whose revolutionary ideology and programme were clearly anchored in their experiences and in their sense of what had become what the late Professor Rex Nettleford often called a derided and emasculated ancestral culture.

May Nelson Mandela's impassioned words forever ring in our ears: "never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another". May we in the General Assembly modify those words and make our own commitment and pledge: never, never and never again will our beautiful world continue to be scarred by racial hatred and intolerance of diversity and descend into chaos because of obduracy and intolerance.

However, there can be no peace without justice. Robert Nesta — or, as some members know him, "Bob" — Marley, that revolutionary icon, using the philosophy of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, long cautioned that until the philosophy that holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, everywhere is war. Until there are no longer first- and second-class citizens of any nation; until the colour of a person's skin is of no more significance than the colour of his or her eyes; and until basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all, without regard to race, it will be war. Until that day, the dream of lasting peace, world citizenship and the rule of international morality will remain but a fleeting illusion to be pursued, but never attained.

To avoid any such consequence, let us today do what we did in the past to end slavery, apartheid, colonial rule, discriminatory laws and practices and various unjust wars. Let us do what we did in a collaborative spirit: form a united front that includes all nations, all ethnic groups, all religious groups, all genders, all classes and all castes to end racism, racial discrimination, Afrophobia, xenophobia and related intolerance, and let us do it now, in a spirit of mutual respect and tolerance, and by so doing demonstrate our commitment to the foundational principle of the inherent dignity of the human person.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to the representative of Slovenia, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Eastern European States.

Mr. Marn (Slovenia): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the Group of Eastern European States.

The Group of Eastern European States welcomes today's meeting of the General Assembly devoted to the commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which is being held this year under the theme "Learning from historical tragedies to combat racial discrimination today".

Combating racism lies at the heart of the United Nations. Human beings are born free and equal in dignity and in rights. All members of our societies, without distinction of any kind, must be treated equally. Nevertheless, racism continues to cause suffering for millions of people around the world. As the most recent report of the Secretary-General on the follow-up to resolution 68/151 shows (A/69/354), despite some progress made in combating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, those forms of discrimination have not been eradicated, and no country can claim to be free from them. We all have to do more, and in this fight we have to be united.

The aim of this year's International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is to explore the root causes of racial discrimination and to learn the lessons history has provided. By remembering tragic events such as the Sharpeville massacre and reminding ourselves of past tragedies, we have to ensure that such abuse of human rights can never be repeated. Education and awareness-raising are important tools in combating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, but we should also do more in promoting intercultural dialogue, tolerance and respect for diversity.

In a few months we will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. The Convention is and should remain the basis of all efforts to prevent, combat and eradicate racism. In that respect, we would like to reiterate the fundamental importance of ratifying and fully implementing the Convention, which should be a priority for all countries, and to express our wish for its early universal ratification. At the same time, we would like to underline that the fight against racism is a primary responsibility of the State and that policy, legislative and other effective measures should be taken by each country at the national level in order to achieve progress in our common endeavours.

The Eastern European States are deeply concerned that the objective of eradicating racism has not yet been attained and that, despite many efforts, much still needs to be done at the national, regional and international levels. We remain committed to continuing the fight against racism and racial discrimination, which remains a priority in our human rights agendas. We also support the work of civil society organizations in this area and their activities aimed at raising public awareness on the importance of fighting this phenomenon.

In conclusion, let me reiterate that the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance is an issue that concerns all countries. The efforts of the international community for the total elimination of this scourge can be successful only if we all work together to achieve this shared objective.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to the representative of Jamaica, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States.

Mr. Rattray (Jamaica): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States.

The Latin American and the Caribbean States reaffirm our steadfast commitment to eliminating the scourge of racial discrimination in keeping with the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. Racism has no place in our world, and its negative consequences, as manifested in the discrimination and dehumanization faced by too many of the world's citizens, must be addressed with greater urgency and effectiveness.

The theme selected for this year's commemoration — "Learning from historical tragedies to combat racial discrimination today" — is most fitting. Taking a look at the historical tragedies that have racial discrimination as their root cause, among them slavery, the Holocaust, apartheid, genocide and segregation, provides the impetus for us to ensure that horrors such as those never recur. We have made significant efforts in the past to do so, among them the passage of the landmark International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. However, we must move beyond rhetoric to achieve tangible progress in defeating the monster of racial discrimination, as many challenges remain in the social, economic and political spheres.

The International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024, with its extensive programme of activities adopted during this very session (see A/69/PV.55), seeks to address many of the lingering legacies of one of the greatest forms of racial discrimination the world has ever seen and continues to grapple with. This International Decade will complement the Latin American and Caribbean Decade of People of African Descent, which began in January 2014, as proclaimed by the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in September 2013. On that occasion, CELAC also decided to advocate in favour of the adoption of the International Decade for People of African Descent. Both decades provide the framework for taking concrete measures to address the wide-ranging effects of racism on people of African descent today.

Recently, in the CELAC action plan for 2015 adopted at the third CELAC Summit, held in Belén, Costa Rica, on 29 January, our Community decided to implement the Latin American and Caribbean People of African Descent Action Plan, which resulted from the CELAC working group meeting on people of African descent held in Brasilia on 4 and 5 September 2014. CELAC also decided to develop a regional agenda that promotes social inclusion policies for populations of African descent.

The Member States in our region comprise multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual populations. Our societies stand to benefit from the richness of the diversity of our peoples. We recognize that encouraging the full participation and contribution of all our peoples is a significant route towards fulfilling our own development goals. In that respect, countries of our region firmly believe that sustainable development cannot be achieved except where it is achieved for all people, regardless of racial distinction.

In this pivotal year of 2015, the Latin American and Caribbean States reaffirm their determination to promote the full inclusion of all persons in our societies, regardless of their race or ethnic background, and to achieve a region and world free of racial discrimination.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to the representative of Belgium, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Western European and Other States.

Ms. Frankinet (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the Group of Western European and Other States in this commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

The General Assembly proclaimed this day in remembrance of the massacre that took place 55 years ago in Sharpeville, South Africa, where 69 people were killed and many others injured during a peaceful protest against apartheid. This month we also commemorate another important historic event: the fiftieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama. It was there, on 7 March 1965, on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, that state police officers violently attacked a peaceful civil rights march.

Today we come together to express our solidarity with present and past victims of racism and racial discrimination. We pay tribute to exceptional leaders who paved the way, such as Nelson Mandela, who courageously led the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, and Martin Luther King, Junior, who led thousands of peaceful demonstrators from Selma to Montgomery in the historic voting rights march. We also pay tribute to the ordinary people who made extraordinary contributions and helped to sustain those movements against racial discrimination. Those collective efforts have been crucial in the global fight against racism and in the development of both international and national frameworks aimed at the elimination of racial discrimination.

This year also marks the fiftieth anniversary of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. In 1965, it was the first basic international human rights treaty; today, with 177 States parties, the Convention has been ratified by virtually all States. The independent experts of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination play an essential role in monitoring the implementation of the Convention and in helping States in adopting policies aimed at combating racism and racial discrimination.

Over the past 50 years progress has been made in the fight against racial discrimination. Yet we must acknowledge that racism and racial discrimination are still embedded in all societies and that, in some instances, tensions run high and require us to take urgent action. History has proved time and again that racism and racial discrimination threaten the very foundations of our societies and leave a damaging impact for generations. We must learn from past tragedies and redouble our efforts to combat racism today. We need to ensure the effective implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and honour our commitments.

On the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, let us embrace tolerance and join together to put an end to racial discrimination wherever it occurs. Let us reaffirm the fundamental principle enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

The Acting President: We have heard the last speaker in this commemorative meeting.

May I take it that it is the wish of the General Assembly to conclude its consideration of agenda item 66?

It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 10.55 a.m.